

EXHIBIT “D”

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Hacked messages show Qatar appearing to pay hundreds of millions to free hostages

by **Joby Warrick** April 28

One morning last April, in the 16th month of a grueling hostage negotiation, a top Qatari diplomat sent a text message to his boss to complain about a brazen robbery being perpetrated against his own country.

Qatar had entered secret talks to free 25 of its citizens from kidnappers in Iraq, yet the bargaining had turned into a kind of group shakedown, the official said, with a half-dozen militias and foreign governments jostling to squeeze cash from the wealthy Persian Gulf state.

“The Syrians, Hezbollah-Lebanon, Kata’ib Hezbollah, Iraq — all want money, and this is their chance,” Zayed bin Saeed al-Khayareen, Qatar’s ambassador to Iraq and chief negotiator in the hostage affair, wrote in the message. “All of them are thieves.”

And yet, the Qataris were willing to pay, and pay they did, confidential documents confirm.

In the April text message and in scores of other private exchanges spanning 1½ years, Qatari officials fret and grouse, but then they appear to consent to payments totaling at least \$275 million to free nine members of the royal family and 16 other Qatari nationals kidnapped during a hunting trip in southern Iraq, according to copies of the intercepted communications obtained by The Washington Post.

The secret records reveal for the first time that the payment plan allocated an additional \$150 million in cash for individuals and groups acting as intermediaries, although they have long been regarded by U.S. officials as sponsors of international terrorism. These include Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Kata’ib Hezbollah, an Iraqi paramilitary group linked to numerous lethal attacks on American troops during the Iraq War, the records show.

The payments were part of a larger deal that would involve the Iranian, Iraqi and Turkish governments as well as Lebanon's Hezbollah militia and at least two Syrian opposition groups, including al-Nusra Front, the notorious Sunni rebel faction linked to al-Qaeda. The total sum demanded for the return of the hostages at times climbed as high as \$1 billion, although it is not clear from the documents exactly how much money ultimately changed hands.

Qatar, which acknowledged receiving help from multiple countries in securing the hostages' release last year, has consistently denied [reports](#) that it paid terrorist organizations as part of the deal. In a letter last month denouncing a published account of the events in the New York Times, Qatar's ambassador to the United States asserted flatly that "Qatar did not pay a ransom."

"The idea that Qatar would undertake activities that support terrorism is false," the ambassador, Sheikh Meshal bin Hamad al-Thani, wrote. The letter does not deny that Qatar paid money to end the crisis, but it suggests that the recipients were government officials, citing vaguely a Qatari initiative with Iraq to "strengthen bilateral relations and ensure the safe release of the abductees."

But the conversations and text messages obtained by The Post paint a more complex portrait. They show senior Qatari diplomats appearing to sign off on a series of side payments ranging from \$5 million to \$50 million to Iranian and Iraqi officials and paramilitary leaders, with \$25 million earmarked for a Kata'ib Hezbollah boss and \$50 million set aside for "Qassem," an apparent reference to [Qassem Soleimani](#), the leader of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and a key participant in the hostage deal.

"You will get your money after we take our people," Khayareen writes in an April 2017 text message, recounting his conversation with a top official of Kata'ib Hezbollah.

The text exchanges are part of a trove of private communications about the hostage ordeal that were surreptitiously recorded by a foreign government and provided to The Post. The intercepted communications also include cellphone conversations and voice-mail messages in Arabic that were played for Post reporters for authentication purposes, on the condition that the name of the foreign government that provided the materials not be revealed.

Qatari officials declined to comment on specific issues raised in the text exchanges. But one senior Middle Eastern official knowledgeable about the communications said the sums mentioned in the texts referred to proposals that were floated by negotiators but ultimately rejected. The official, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss a diplomatically sensitive subject, also asserted that some of the texts appeared to have been edited or repackaged to give a misleading impression, but he did not offer specifics. The official did not dispute reports that hundreds of millions of dollars of Qatar's money were flown to Baghdad in April 2017, just days before the release of the hostages. Iraqi officials confiscated the cash, which has not been returned.

Other governments, including some in the West, have paid ransoms to known terrorist organizations to win the release of kidnapped citizens. For example, France and Spain paid cash to kidnappers — either directly or through state-owned companies — to free French and Spanish nationals captured by the Islamic State or al-Qaeda affiliates in separate incidents between 2010 and 2014.

But Qatar's bargaining with militants over the hostage affair would become a flash point in a larger feud between the country and its Arab neighbors, some of which have repeatedly criticized Qatari leaders over what they say are the country's cordial ties with Iran and support for the Muslim Brotherhood and other groups identified with political Islam. Weeks after the hostages were freed, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates joined three other Arab states in severing relations with Qatar, triggering a diplomatic crisis that quickly escalated into a virtual blockade on shipping and air travel into and out of Qatar.

The rift has occasionally prompted the Trump administration to take sides. Last June, President Trump voiced support for the embargo and blasted Qatar as a "funder of terrorism at a very high level." But Trump lavished praise on Qatar's emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, when he visited Washington this month, calling him a "big advocate" for combating terrorism financing.

An ancient pastime

It started with a simple hunting trip, albeit one that was marred from the outset by bad luck and questionable decisions about the excursion's timing and locale.

Iraq in late 2015 was an extraordinarily dangerous place. A third of the country was occupied by the Islamic State, while elsewhere, bands of Kurdish and Shiite militiamen roamed towns and villages as Iraqi leaders mobilized for an all-out assault against the Islamist extremists. Yet, in November 2015, a large party of Qataris entered southern Iraq's Muthanna province to enjoy a pastime favored by well-to-do Arabs since antiquity: using trained falcons to hunt a desert game bird called the houbara bustard.

The outing was nearing its end on Dec. 15, 2015, when heavily armed fighters rolled into the foreigners' camp in trucks. Twenty-eight members of the hunting party — 25 Qataris, two Saudis and a Pakistani — were taken hostage, the starting point in a confusing, politically charged drama that lasted just over 16 months.

Who, exactly, was behind the kidnapping was initially unclear, but Qatari officials quickly came to suspect that Iraqis had leaked information about the hunting party to the kidnappers. The Qatari hunters had given the precise coordinates of their camp to Iraq's Interior Ministry as part of their permit application, and Iraqi government employees had made a surprise visit to the camp just hours before the men were captured, according to the senior Middle Eastern official familiar with the events.

In any case, Qatari officials quickly sought help from the Iraqi government and Iraqi Shiite leaders in initiating contact with the kidnappers.

Qatar soon learned that the hostages were being held by Kata'ib al-Imam Ali, an obscure Iraqi Shiite militant group affiliated with Kata'ib Hezbollah. Both organizations receive funding and weapons from Iran, and the latter is officially designated by the United States a foreign terrorist group. Kata'ib Hezbollah was linked to scores of roadside bomb and sniper attacks against U.S. personnel in Iraq in the last decade, and since 2013, it has waged war against the Islamic State in Iraq, while also joining other Shiite militias in defending embattled dictator Bashar al-Assad inside Syria.

In response to the kidnappings, Qatar set up a crisis team that included Khayareen and Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani, as well as Hamad bin Khalifa al-Attiyah, a personal adviser to the emir. Once it became clear that the captors were an Iranian-backed militia

group, the officials began working through an array of influential intermediaries to gain the hostages' freedom.

Of the complex deal that ultimately emerged, key elements have been documented by other publications. The [Guardian](#) and the Financial Times last year [described](#) how the release of Qatar's hostages became tied to an Iranian-engineered plan, supported by Turkey and Lebanon's Hezbollah, to evacuate four Syrian villages — two Sunni and two Shiite — that had been under siege for months by different militant groups. Last month, an [article](#) in the New York Times Magazine recounted the seizure of \$360 million in Qatari cash — money apparently intended in part to pay off the Syrian fighters and implement the evacuations — by Iraqi officials at Baghdad's international airport as the hostage-release plan was being implemented.

But what was unknown until now was that key conversations about the hostage affair were monitored by outsiders.

In the recorded communications between diplomats and mediators, Qatari officials complain about the prospect of paying millions of dollars to reward violent organizations that engage in kidnapping. But then they are seen to approve a plan to do exactly that.

Confusing demands

At the outset, Qatari diplomats appeared to struggle to understand what the kidnappers wanted. After a perplexing silence in the early weeks of the ordeal, Kata'ib Hezbollah officials spoke directly to Khayareen to discuss the possibility of releasing two of the captives, while also issuing confusing demands.

Khayareen, recounting the phone conversations with Kata'ib Hezbollah's negotiator, told Qatar's foreign minister that the militants asked him to "bring the money" in exchange for the two hostages. But later, through an Iraqi intermediary, the kidnappers asked for other concessions that appeared intended to benefit Iran: Qatar's complete withdrawal from the Saudi-led coalition fighting Shiite Houthi rebels in Yemen, and a promise to release Iranian soldiers held by Qatari-backed Sunni rebels in Syria.

“Your requests are not logical at all,” the kidnappers were told, Khayareen wrote in a March 2016 text.

But soon afterward, money becomes a primary focus. In the text exchanges and phone conversations, Qatari officials initially discuss a payment of \$150 million to Kata’ib Hezbollah if all the hostages are released, with an additional fee of \$10 million to an Iraqi mediator for the group identified as Abu Mohammed al-Sa’adi. It was the first of many discussions of possible side payments for militia officials and mediators, some of whom demanded additional money from the Qataris while simultaneously asking for discretion so that their militia brethren would not discover that they were receiving bonuses.

“Al-Sa’adi asked me, ‘What’s in it for me?’ ” Khayareen told the Qatari foreign minister in a voice-mail message played for The Post. “The man told me frankly, ‘I want ten [million dollars]. I told him, ‘Ten? I am not giving you ten. Only in one case: If you get my guys done, 100 percent, I will give you the \$150 [million] and then I will give you the ten.’”

As the dickering continued through the spring of 2016, wildly differing figures were thrown around as the cast of interlocutors grew to include Soleimani and other senior Iranian officials. In May, Khayareen tells his boss that negotiators have arrived at a figure of \$275 million, with the transaction set to take place in Iraq’s Sulaymaniyah province. At several points, the figure \$1 billion is suggested as the price of a comprehensive deal involving the Iranians and the four-village evacuation plan. Soleimani had been seeking to implement the village plan for nearly two years, and Iranian officials apparently viewed the Qatari hostages as leverage, since Qatari-backed rebel groups were besieging two Shiite villages and their cooperation was essential to making the plan work.

“Qassem was pressuring the kidnappers and is very upset with them,” Khayareen says in an April 2016 text message. Later, his texts describe trips by Soleimani to meet with the Kata’ib group in Iraq, as well as meetings between Qatari negotiators and representatives of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the office of Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

In May 2016, Qatar appears to balk at the Iranian plan, sending word through an intermediary that the fate of the Syrian villages was a United Nations affair, and Qatari officials “don’t cooperate or

open a channel” with terrorist groups. At several points, the messages reflect Qatari anxiety over the safety of the hostages, the escalating demands for payments and the political pressure placed on Doha to use its wealth to end the ordeal.

The negotiations dragged on fruitlessly for months until late 2016, when the militants finally appear to have grown weary of talking.

“The Kata’ib told the [mediator] that they are fed up with the case and want any solution to end it, so [they] get some money out of it,” Khayareen writes in November of that year. “It seems that the group is bankrupt.”

By April 2017, after additional meetings with Iranians, the outlines of a comprehensive deal are in place. In a carefully choreographed chain of events, buses arrive at the four Syrian villages to begin the evacuations, and the Qatari hostages are taken to Baghdad and released. Senior Qatari officials are present to help oversee both events, the documents show.

How much money the Qataris ultimately doled out to close the deal is not spelled out in the documents obtained by The Post. But the Qataris in the intercepted communications are explicit about the amounts earmarked for individuals who assisted in delivering the hostages. Just days after the captives’ release, on April 25, 2017, Khayareen picks up his cellphone once more to give Qatar’s foreign minister the breakdown. He lists five recipients who would divvy up \$150 million in Qatari cash:

“Qassem, 50. Sulaymaniyah [provincial government official who facilitated the negotiations], 50. Abu Hussain, leader of Kata’ib, 25. Banhai [Iranian official involved in the talks], 20.”

The final person on the list is Abu Mohammed al-Sa’adi, the negotiator for Kata’ib Hezbollah who had asked for an extra \$10 million. He is rewarded with \$5 million.


Khayareen follows up with a seven-second voice-mail message to his boss confirming that all the payments have been made.

“They are done and distributed,” he is heard to say.

Azhar AlFadl Miranda contributed to this report.

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